

The Uhai Lake Forum Development Group: Community Initiatives for the Conservation of Lake Victoria Resources

In 1996, the Office of Women in Development of the United States Agency for International Development launched a five-year project known as the Women in Development Technical Assistance Project (WIDTECH) to support gender integration in development policies and programs. WIDTECH's experience has underscored why it is important to ensure that women are equal participants in development, and how this can be accomplished. WIDTECH's small grants program provided 27 grants worth nearly \$475,000 to non-governmental and community-based organizations worldwide. The following describes one of these projects, offering insights into the many ways that women are improving their lives and well-being, as well as those of their families, communities, and nations. Please visit www.widtech.org for more information on this and other WIDTECH small grants.

It is clear that development programs increasingly link the improvement of natural resource management with local economic development. When successful, this approach is a boon to the environment and local communities. The integration of gender-related perspectives further enhances the appropriateness and effectiveness of development and conservation projects.

Lake Victoria in Kenya represents one of the most diverse ecosystems in the world. Communities in the area rely on the lake for fish as a major source of protein, and on surrounding wetlands for papyrus and reeds with which to make products for both household use and sale. In recent decades, the overexploitation of natural resources by local communities and inadequate environmental management have led to the degradation of both vegetative and aquatic life.

At the same time, the livelihoods of many people in the region are threatened because of the decrease in natural resources and the health of the Lake Victoria ecosystem, which are in turn linked to problems such as pollution, unsustainable fishing practices, and the mismanagement of fishing cooperatives.

In 2001, WIDTECH issued a grant to the Uhai ("livelihood" in Kiswahili) Lake Forum Development Group to facilitate the production of a video about

creative community initiatives for the conservation of Lake Victoria resources. The grant also supported the development and publication of written materials based on previous activities, specifically a regional workshop of East African community conservationists, researchers, and policymakers (known as Forum '99); a forum for women community elders; and Lake Victoria Advocacy Days in 2000 and 2001.

Uhai's approach is based on a model of "eco-culture." The organization emphasizes the need to integrate a "people dimension" into conservation work in the area, which has in the past largely focused on biological resource perspectives only. Similarly, Uhai believes that development programs have emphasized economic dimensions and quick, technical solutions, rather than incorporating indigenous knowledge, experiences, skills, wisdom, and local governance systems.

Results and Achievements

- Uhai produced a video titled "Mothers of Nature: Women in the Conservation of Lake Victoria" that emphasized the positive participation of women in fish breeding activities and soil conservation.
- A book of proceedings from Uhai's forums, *Community Conservation Initiatives towards Livelihood Security*

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in the Lake Victoria Basin: Issues, Challenges, Problems, and Opportunities, contains extensive information on conservation issues, possibilities for investment, and the perspectives and initiatives of communities.

- A clear gender perspective was integrated throughout the proceedings of the forums and in the development of strategies to restore Lake Victoria to health. For example:
 - Kit-Mikayi's plans to balance fishing for local consumption versus export take into account how exploitation by middlemen and fish processors have marginalized women traders, who lack the financial capacity and modern fishing techniques to compete.
 - Efforts to reverse massive deforestation and soil erosion throughout Migori must consider how these problems are in part caused by women, who cut trees for fuel.
 - Women in the Lake Victoria region are denied by law any independent land-use rights. A woman's right to use land exists only for the duration of her marriage, and she therefore has no control over the ways resources are used or the benefits they offer.
 - Recommendations resulting from Forum '99 called for making information on poverty alleviation policies available to women.
 - Many communities have developed gender-based action plans, including involving women in halting pollution, improving women's access to credit, and providing home-based assistance for HIV/AIDS patients.
 - The forum for women elders resulted in resolutions (submitted to the Lake Victoria general assembly) calling for the promotion of gender equity in resource management and of women's visibility in future decision-making. The same forum also yielded a set of recommendations on ways to increase women's economic, educational, and political involvement and status in order to further resource conservation.

Conclusions

In just a short time, and with limited resources, Uhai developed and thoroughly documented a wide range of activities. The organization's achievements are impressive

because they involved a wide range of grassroots groups in economic development and conservation activities. Many of the key organizers of and participants in the various projects were women, and by emphasizing gender-related issues, trends, and perspectives in all of its activities, Uhai has helped spark new awareness among elders, researchers, and policymakers about the role of gender in development.

Uhai's forums brought together previously unconnected groups, from academic researchers to village elders to fish traders. Common interests that bind these seemingly disparate groups together were highlighted (i.e., the need for both resource protection and viable livelihoods). The forum was an important first step towards improving regional collaboration (as well as across borders in East Africa) to enhance sustainable development. Participants learned a great deal about the work of others, as well as gaining new perspectives on their own.

Uhai's recent work has also resulted in links with institutions and non-governmental organizations, which will in the future facilitate efforts to simultaneously support communities while finding ways to conserve natural resources. Uhai's participatory, broad approach is precisely what is needed to ensure that any development and conservation projects undertaken around Lake Victoria have positive, real, and long-lasting effects that benefit people and ecosystems alike.

Bibliography

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